

# **A Discourse Domain Approach to Interlanguage Variation: Its influence on Korean EFL learners' conversational behavior**

Sina Lee  
(Seoul National University)

Lee, Sina. 2004. A Discourse Domain Approach to Interlanguage Variation. *SNU Working Papers in English Language and Linguistics* 3, #-#. Interlanguage studies in SLA have dealt with its attributes in systematicity and variability. This study targeted on interlanguage variation based upon the Discourse Domain Model (Selinker & Douglas 1985) and examined its effects on learners' conversational behavior. The results showed that discourse-domain speakers revealed active participation producing greater number of words/t-units. The structures were also grammatically more complex and coherent with greater subordinate clauses per t-unit. The overall speech rate had accelerated in these fields. Even the intermediate students displayed greater L2 performance on their discourse-domains. However, higher L2 proficiency seemed to compensate for the lack of content-knowledge and did not greatly influence the advanced learners. Discourse domain speakers had sufficient content-knowledge and greater interest which enabled them to make elaborations with specific descriptions. However, neutral-domain speakers showed contrastively different behaviors with uncertainty, employing hedges and code-switching strategies. (Seoul National University)

**Keywords:** discourse domain, interlanguage, variation, conversational behavior, content-knowledge, communication strategies

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background and Motivation**

Second language research in the area of learner language variation has illuminated its variability and systematicity. As Beebe (1980) pointed out, sociolinguistic variation in the field of second language acquisition (henceforth SLA) has begun its investigation from the early 1980s. Observed from a sociolinguistic view of learner language variation, in particular, the robust effects of numerous social and situational factors drew remarkable attention (Beebe 1980, Beebe & Takahashi 1989,

Blum-Kulka & House 1989, Douglas & Selinker 1985, Gass & Varonis 1984, Selinker & Douglas 1985, Takahashi & Beebe 1993, Zuengler & Bent 1991, Zuengler 1993).

The underlying implication of sociolinguistic-based SLA research is that learners' L2 performance varies dramatically according to the situational context; e.g., who their addressee is, what their conversational topic is about, how much expertise they possess on that subject and so forth. Among these sociological factors, relevant content-knowledge on a particular topic domain contributes substantially to L2 performance in interaction, but has received comparatively less attention in this line of research (Zuengler 1989, Zuengler & Bent 1991, Zuengler 1993, Whyte 1994, 1995).

Previous research, however, has not considered the influence of the content of the topic. Despite the fact that relevant content-knowledge reveals a greater impact on the speaker's output production, the role of prior knowledge has contributed mainly to fields in L2 reading and listening comprehension.

At this point, therefore, the concern arises as to whether or not the effect of the content-knowledge is generally applicable even to conversational interactions among speakers with different first language backgrounds. In this respect, Zuengler (1993), Zuengler & Bent (1991) and Whyte (1994, 1995) have empirically studied the role of content-knowledge in second language research, built upon the cornerstone of the Discourse Domain Hypothesis (Selinker & Douglas 1985).

Based upon the previous empirical theories highlighting the importance of conversational discourse domain and its influence on interlanguage performance, learners' conversational behavior may vary greatly depending upon the individual learner's discourse domain. Therefore, it is notable that there have been no observational research findings so far that have observed the effects of discourse domains in communicative interactions between Korean EFL learners and Native Speakers (NS). In this perspective, this paper strongly argues for the need of research in a discourse domain approach, which may contribute to a better understanding of Korean EFL learners' interlanguage performances along with their conversational behavior.

## 1.2 Previous Studies

Interlanguage variation, a phenomenon commonly viewed as the learners' performance, has also been observed in interactional settings. Through language production, the learners display their state of interlanguage development, and it is especially in communicative tasks of discourse activities, where learners' participation is naturally led to the acquisition phase (Perdue & Klein 1993, cited in Mitchell & Myles 1998).

However, in order for interactional settings to become an optimal educational environment for second language oral production, *motivation to communicate* must be fostered (Rivers 1983: 49). Regarding this aspect, discourse domains, where learners possess maximum interest, knowledge and practice effects may provoke more authority and dominance of role in conversational participation even to the Nonnative Speakers (NNSs), while increasing the NNSs' motivation and facilitating interlanguage development in a conversation with a NS. Recent studies on discourse domains in NS-NNS interactions support this claim that, in discourse domains, learners' oral production was indeed facilitated (Zuengler & Bent 1991, Zuengler 1993, Whyte 1994, 1995).

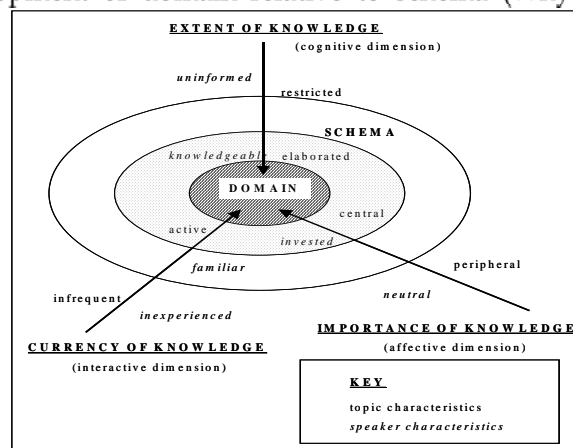
Zuengler and Bent (1991) examined content-knowledge effects on participation patterns in interactions between NSs and NNSs. Forty-five advanced EFL learners were paired with 45 NSs according to the level of expertise on their academic major. Each pair was engaged in a ten-minute conversation on two topics; their academic major fields and their non-major fields. Six measures of conversational participation indicators were then used to code the data; the amount of talk, interruptions, resisting interruptions, pause fillers, back-channels, and topic moves. The results partially supported the claim that content expertise be a crucial factor in a NS-NNS interaction. That is, the relative content 'experts' used significantly more talk, more fillers and more back-channels.

Learners' interlanguage performance variation on discourse domain topics was first developed by Selinker & Douglas (1985), known as the Discourse Domain Hypothesis. Learners' conversational behavior varies according to certain discourse domains, e.g. the extent of relevant knowledge and the degree of significance of a domain, both of which

have been considered to influence the conversational behavior of the speaker. Knowledge of a certain topic is an important factor that reveals the learners' cognitive process of how input information is achieved and interpreted within the learners' individual framework. Content expertise on a particular domain evokes the dominance of a conversation and therefore enhances the interlanguage performance providing more motivation to increase the amount of talk (Selinker & Douglas 1985, Zuengler & Bent 1991, Zuengler 1993, Whyte 1994, 1995).

The notion of the discourse domain is a term which is founded on topic knowledge, but is also considered from a cognitive and affective dimension. *Discourse domain*, a term narrowed from *schema* (general background knowledge), refers to knowledge that has received greater exposure (cognitive dimension), increased interest and importance (affective dimension), and thus a domain which can be highly personal. These cognitive and affective perspectives influence interlanguage performance, especially second language oral proficiency along with exposure to content relevant knowledge. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1.  
Development of domain relative to schema (Whyte, 1995)



Whyte (1994) constructed her research upon the foundation of the Discourse Domain Hypothesis. Whyte proved that content expertise had the effect of lending NNSs greater authority of the floor, promoting enhanced language production. Eight advanced EFL students were

interviewed by the researcher on two topics; their major field and a neutral topic from their class textbook selected by the researcher. The results showed that when learners were engaged in their major field, they exhibited not only enhanced performance, greater fluency and greater complexity, but also lower error rates. This study, however, raised the problem of a few crucial methodological flaws of the implicit research design, which will be reviewed in detail later.

In a later study, Whyte (1995) investigated specialist knowledge and text construction in a discourse domain perspective by interviewing ten advanced ESL learners at a university in the U.S. on two topics for about ten minutes on each topic. This study was conducted with a hypothesis that invested learners would produce more complex, more independent and more coherent talk on their discourse domain revealing specialist knowledge. The results turned out that learners displayed more accurate discourse organization on their discourse domains.

The present study attempts to investigate whether or not learners' discourse domain influences Korean EFL learners' conversational patterns in interactions with NSs based on the early work by Zuengler & Bent (1991) and Whyte (1994, 1995). Accordingly, it is hypothesized that learners' discourse domains will facilitate enhanced L2 productions in NS-NNS interactions in EFL settings, as in Korea. At this point, a genuine discourse domain which exposes the learners' maximum interest, content-knowledge, and practice effects needs to be reconsidered.

In order to have a deeper understanding of the discourse domains in NS-NNS interactions, further additional factors such as L2 proficiency levels and EFL learners' communication strategies are also taken into account. The discourse domain based interactions may aid second language users to a greater participation in their target language, where learners gain greater interest to engage in the conversations and motivation to communicate is facilitated.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The main purpose of the present study is to examine the effects of the discourse domain and the conversational behaviors of Korean EFL

learners. Therefore, this study was undertaken in an attempt to answer the following research questions:

[Research Question 1]

Does the discourse domain exert influence on the conversational behaviors of Korean EFL learners in NS-NNS interactions?

[Research Question 2]

Will the influence of the discourse domain be different depending on the learners' second language proficiency level?

[Research Question 3]

What are the conversational features demonstrated in the learners' discourse domains and the neutral topic domains?

## **2. Research Design**

### **2.1 Subject Selection**

The participants of this study were intermediate and advanced Korean EFL students enrolled in diverse universities with various majors. For the intermediate level, 10 students were selected and for the advanced level, 12. The participants were asked for their TOEIC, TOEFL, or TEPS scores so that their proficiency levels could be determined. The intermediate level were classified as students who contained TEPS scores between 600 and 800. The advanced level were those who scored over 800 in TEPS. In order to eliminate the effect of gender, all the participants selected were female.

Moreover, to gain insight into whether or not the academic majors could be regarded as learners' discourse domains, 4 graduate students also participated in the experiment. The motivation to include graduate students in the study has to do with the EFL setting in Korea. That is, as will be shown later, Korean college students do not seem to have similar topic familiarity in their major as demonstrated in the previous studies (e.g., Selinker & Douglas 1985, Whyte 1994, 1995, Zuengler 1989, Zuengler & Bent 1991). Therefore in the current study, the assigned

discourse domain topics to the undergraduates were not their majors but topics with great familiarity. In order to observe the effect of the learners' majors, however, it was additionally designed for the graduate students who were assumed to have more knowledge on their major and presumably had some experience talking about it.

Two native speakers were selected to be interviewers. The NSs were sufficiently informed of their roles as interviewers of the NS-NNS conversation.

## **2.2 Instruments**

### **2.2.1 Topic Selection**

A careful methodological consideration is required in assigning discourse domains and neutral domains to the EFL learner. Previous studies (Zuengler 1989, Zuengler & Bent 1991, Whyte 1994, 1995) demonstrated that learners' discourse domains were fields where they had greater knowledge and greater investment with sufficient practice effects. These descriptions were designated merely to the learners' academic majors. In the present research, however, academic majors are not considered as the 'discourse domains' as in the prior studies because the majority of the Korean EFL university students do not have sufficient L2 practice effects on their majors, and their majors do not necessarily reflect their maximum interest or investment. Therefore, in this study, the discourse domain topics for the subjects were general fields that the learners reported to have maximum knowledge about and interest in.

In order to decide on the topics the subjects were most familiar to talk about, several conversation topics that frequently appear in ESL conversation textbooks were considered. Among those topics ranging in a wide variety of general fields such as economics, politics, entertainment and current affairs, ten most popular topics were selected and investigated through the anonymous internet survey. The selected topics were [Marriage & Divorce], [Koreans' Preference for Boys], [Superstitions], [College Cheating], [Korean Spending Habits], [Finding a Job], [Keeping Fit], [Smoking & Drinking], [Generation X] and [Dating].

Additionally, for the graduate students, this research has attempted to replicate the previous literature (Zuengler 1989, Zuengler & Bent 1991,

Whyte 1994, 1995) by assigning the learners' academic majors as the discourse domains and have provided the same ten topics as the undergraduate students for their neutral topic domain.

### **2.2.2 Pre-conversation Questionnaire**

To assess the participants' relevant content-knowledge and their individual interest of the discourse domains, a self-rating questionnaire was administered before the interview. In the questionnaire, the subjects were asked to rank the previously selected ten topics in order of interest, from 1 (most interesting) to 10 (least interesting). Then, they were asked to rate each topic according to the degree of knowledge they had on each topic from 1 (maximum knowledge) to 5 (minimum knowledge).

Based on the responses from the questionnaires, two conversation topics were assigned for each participant. Topic 1 indicated the domain, which the learner marked for great store of content-knowledge with maximum interest, their discourse domain. Topic 2 referred to the area, which the learner had minimum knowledge and also had least interest in, their neutral topic domain.

### **2.2.3 Conversation Guidance Questions**

A few optional guiding questions were provided in case they had difficulty maintaining their conversation. However, it should be noted that it is possible for the recording to have influenced the speaker's conversational behavior.

### **2.2.4 Post-conversation Questionnaire**

In order to examine further on the participants' conversational behavior for each topic, a post-conversation questionnaire was given. The questionnaire was mainly concerned with the subjects' previous practice effects on the discourse domain topic, their personal impressions on talking about the two topics and the degree of confidence according



to the two domains.

### **2.3 Procedures**

Each of the Korean participants had an interview with a NS on two conversational fields for approximately 10 minutes. The pre-conversation questionnaires elicited two domains from each participant, Topic 1, the learners' discourse domain, and Topic 2 the learners' neutral topic domain.

To foster an intimate environment between the speakers, 10 to 15 minutes of the ice-breaking phase were sufficiently provided before the actual experiment began. As soon as the conversation on two fields was over, the participants immediately took the post-conversation questionnaire so that they could evaluate it in detail.

### **2.4 Data Coding and Analysis**

To measure second language learners' conversational participation on discourse domains quantitatively, three chief measures were used; length of response, grammatical complexity, and other indicators of fluency. The Korean EFL learners' length of response was measured by the number of words, number of t-units, and the duration of talk for each of the two conversations. The grammatical complexity of a turn was characterized by measuring the t-unit length and the subordinate clauses per t-unit. Non-native speakers' fluency of oral productions was indicated by measuring the number of fillers, false starts per 100 words, and by the speech rate of the participants' turn.

This paper, however, attempts to put more emphasis on the qualitative analysis, examining learners' discourse organization in terms of communication strategy and conversational behavior. Detailed observations were made to see how learners managed their turns and constructed their discourse according to each domain topic. In particular, various conversational features were demonstrated including the specificity of message conveyance, the resolution of insufficient content-knowledge, and code-switching as a communication strategy,

which learners make up for their deficiencies during their L2 productions.

## **2.4.1 Quantitative Measures**

### **2.4.1.1 Length of Responses**

Amount of speech is one of the quantitative measures that describes the speakers' conversational behaviors. The increase in the number of words implies active participation of the speaker and the willingness to continue the communication assisting the addressee in the comprehension of message conveyance, whereas the decrease in the amount of words implies communication cut-offs and avoidance to succeed the interaction (Pica, Young and Doughty 1987). Amount of speech was evaluated in three dimensions in this research; the number of words, t-units and time of talk.

The number of words was calculated by counting every full lexical word, excluding fillers, back-channels, and fragmented words. Whyte (1994, 1995) and Zuengler & Bent (1991) also measured the number of words in their studies to interpret learners' conversational behavior. Although this research is not an exact replication of these former studies, the collected perspective was that discourse domain speakers would display significantly greater productions, constructing lengthy talks than on their neutral topic domains.

In order to observe NNSs' construction of turns in their conversation, t-units were measured as in the work of Arther et al. (1980) and Whyte (1994). The t-unit is defined as a single independent clause together with all modifying dependent clauses (Kellogg 1965, cited in Arthur et al. 1980). Discourse domain speakers are assumed to produce more coherent, grammatically extended structures through increased number of t-units, whereas the neutral topic domain speakers produce more fragmented, more grammatically simplified speech.

The duration of the NNSs' talk was measured by timing the total participation of each Korean EFL speaker's turn in seconds. Even though the recording session was from the beginning of ice-breaking phase till the end of the conversation, the data analysis excluded the ice-breaking phase. To compare both conversational topics on an equal scale, time of talk was then calculated into the overall NNSs' participation rate from

the total interview.

#### **2.4.1.2 Grammatical Complexity**

Zuengler and Bent (1991) reported that speakers with expertise have a tendency to not only make lengthy talks but talks that reveal more coherent, structured turns. The complexity of each turn is characterized by measuring the number of words per t-unit and the number of subordinate clauses for each t-unit. T-units are the "general measure of syntactic complexity" (Arthur et al. 1980: 116). By examining the number of words per t-unit and the number of subordinate clauses per t-unit on both domains, results may provide support to the research hypothesis set beforehand.

#### **2.4.1.3 Indicators of Fluency**

Fillers reflect the speakers' cognitive state as well as their communication behaviors. Fillers, in this paper, are literally understood as meaningless pause-fillers that do not function as discourse markers. Fillers such as "uh", "um" were mainly coded and counted.

A false start reveals the disfluency of the participants' performance (Arthur et al. 1980, Bortfeld et al. 2001, Lickley & Bard 1998). False starts considers those of fragmented utterance, repetition or substitution usually followed by a repaired form per 100 words.

L2 learners' interlanguage variation is also displayed by the speech rate. Speech rate reveals the "state of the speakers and the state of the ongoing conversations" (Koiso, Shimojima & Katagiri 1998). It is calculated by summing up the total number of spoken words and dividing it by the total time spent on communication.

#### **2.4.2 Qualitative Measures**

In this paper, interlanguage communication strategies were especially focused on strategies of elaboration, exemplification, code-switching and

topic avoidance. A detailed description of the conversational features and the interactional features that demonstrate the subjects' diverse conversational behaviors on the two topics will be discussed in the following chapter.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Quantitative Analysis of Undergraduate Students

Table 1.  
Quantitative Analysis of Undergraduate Students

		Intermediate (n=10)		Advanced (n=12)	
		T1	T2	T1	T2
Length of Responses	mean number of words	152.30	138.30	234.50	219.08
	mean number of t-units	36	32.3	38.17	37.50
	words per t-unit	4.23	4.28	6.14	5.84
	NNSs' participation rate	55.69%	48.88%	63.84%	59.68%
	number of subordinate clauses	25	17	83	77
Grammatical complexity	subordinate clauses per t-unit	0.069	0.053	0.181	0.171
Fluency	mean number of fillers	20.4	19.9	15.67	11.58
	mean number of false starts	11.5	10.4	12.92	12.42
	speech rate	1.198	1.177	1.895	1.799

As shown in Table 1 above, both the intermediate and the advanced students displayed greater in T1 in terms of number of words, t-units, words per t-unit and participation rate. Both level of the participants were also able to display more grammatically complex structures in T1. Although the number of fillers and false starts were also greater in T1, it may be carefully interpreted that these may not only be observed

only as an indicator of disfluency but functioned as an important trigger to aid the process of controlling the floor of the speaker. This supports the results that although the speakers produced more fillers and false starts during their productions in T1, they participated more and had a tendency to provide greater speech rate than in T2.

However, in order to reveal learners' conversational behavior patterns upon domains clearer, in terms of communicative strategies, this research put more emphasis on the actual interview data supporting the discourse domain model with specific illustrations that could not be measured by simple calculations.

## 3.2 Qualitative Analysis of Undergraduate Students

### 3.2.1 Elaboration

One of the conversational features distinguishable from the neutral domain was the communication strategy of elaboration. EFL learners' discourse domains set learners in a position with more authority, and, therefore, discourse domain speakers tended to lead the conversation by maintaining the floor with elaborate descriptions and supported their statements with extended speech planning.

Below is an example where the advanced speaker K.W illustrates Netball, a british game, from her personal experience. K.W is a discourse domain speaker on the topic, [Keeping Fit].

#### Example 1

- 1 K.W : Playing volleyball ... Or .. there's a game called 'Netball' ... It's a British game.
- 2 NS : Oh:!
- 3 K.W : Yeah, it's something like ... it's a girl-it's a girl's version of basketball?
- 4 But you don't dribble the ball.
- 5 NS : Oh:!
- 6 K.W : And you don't have a backboard.
- 7 NS : Oh:!
- 8 K.W : Yeah.
- 9 NS : Oh ... That sounds alright. Is it a smaller ball?
- 10 K.W : No, it's um .. yeah, it's a slightly smaller ball?
- 11 NS : Uh-hmmm ...
- 12 K.W : And it's white?... And .. the .. main purpose is ... to PASS the ball?
- 13 You can pass it with one bounce. And that's it.
- 14 NS : Mmm.
- 15 K.W : And ... you can't touch the ball out from a player's another player's hand.

K.W describes the rules, the size and the color of the ball precisely

in line 3, 4, 6, 10, 12, 13 and 15. In line 1, the NNS narrows down the descriptions from a general category (*volleyball*) to the name of the specific sport (*a game called 'Netball'*). Furthermore, K.W conveys her message, additionally, elaborating with descriptions of the origin (*a British game*). Interestingly enough, in line 3, K.W even constructs highly organized elaborations (*a girls' version of basketball*) which may have greatly facilitated the NS's comprehension.

Greater content expertise was displayed where the Korean EFL speakers carried more information and had personally greater interest in their discourse domains.

### 3.2.2 Expression of Uncertainty

In example 2 the advanced student, Y.O, shares a conversation on [X-Generations], which was assigned as the neutral domain to the advanced Korean EFL learner.

#### Example 2

- 1        NS :    So, do you consider yourself a member of the X Generation?
- 2        Y.O :    Um I wanna know what is X Generation? I want to define definition.
- 3        NS :    Um .. okay ..
- 4~17       ....
- 18       Y.O :    Uhm ... I'm kind of a I'm a little confused with N generation.

In example 2, Y.O faces difficulty responding to the interviewer's question and requests for clarification. Instead of answering the questions immediately, Y.O asks for explanations of the key word, which she lacks sufficient knowledge of. Even after the NS demonstrated the terms quite specifically, Y.O continues to express her uncertainty in line 18. This seems to reveal the cognitive state of Y.O which indicates her low willingness to devote to the conversation continuance.

### 3.2.3 Hedges

Majority of the L2 speakers taking the floor of the conversation on their discourse domains revealed their content-knowledge and interest,

claiming their statements with confident assertions. In contrast, L2 learners showed a tendency of employing hedges (*kind of, sort of, maybe, probably, I don't know...*) in neutral topic domains as mitigators during their speech.

In example 3, J.M, an intermediate Korean EFL learner, is in a conversation on [Generation X] with the interviewer. J.M replied that this domain is the one where she carried minimum content-knowledge and less interest on her pre-conversation questionnaire.

### Example 3

- 1 NS : ... Are there any other reasons why uh older people don't relate to ... younger people?  
 2 Or don't understand?  
 ■ 3 J.M : Um:: ... because (hhh) maybe .. I-I don't know but maybe they are educated  
 4 from older people?  
 5 NS : Uh-hmm.  
 ■ 6 J.M : But u::::m I-I don't know.

Due to lack of sufficient content-knowledge on [Generation X], J.M appears to take this topic as a cognitively heavy load, where she has produced bitter laughter and longer pauses with fillers in line 3. The additive use of hedges (*maybe, I don't know*) in line 3 also reflects an aspect of lower confidence in relation to the domain. This neutral topic domain did not seem to facilitate the EFL learner in longer constructions of speech but rather showed learners' rejections, blocking the flow of the conversation.

### 3.2.4 Code-switching

Among 10 intermediate Korean EFL learners, 7 students have used code-switching strategies at least once during their conversations with a NS. Three students shifted their codes in the discourse domain and the other 3 students altered their codes in the neutral topic domain. Only 1 student, E.H. showed code-switching on both domains. In many of the cases, code-switching occurred through single words flagged with indicators such as lower intonation, hesitation, pause or other signs of hesitation. However, 3 students showed phrasal structures of their L1 mode.

In example 4, the interviewer and I.K, an intermediate Korean EFL

learner, are talking about [Smoking & Drinking] which has been assigned as the learner's neutral topic domain. I.K is asked on her personal opinions on females' smoking.

#### Example 4

- 1 I.K : Uh ... my friend says ... uh pst uh:: who smoke ... uh ... a girl who-who  
 2 smoking ... pst ...  
 3 NS : Uh-hmm.  
 ■ 4 I.K : is um:: mweci<sup>1</sup>? ((clears throat)) ... different of ... be ... mother.  
 5 NS : Oh:: Oh yeah. Um:: .  
 6 I.K : Very very harmful. ... The baby.  
 7 NS : Uh:: . But it doesn't affect ... men's fertility at all?  
 ■ 8 I.K : No ... um ... mweci? ... Environment ... smoking.  
 9 NS : Um:: .  
 10 I.K : ... is very harmful.

The prior example shows the speaker I.K, constantly sending signals of communication difficulty. I.K begins her turn with a filler (*uh*) followed by long pauses and other signs of hesitation (*pst*) in line 1. In the next turn (line 4), the L2 learner searches for the appropriate word by altering her mode in her L1. The burden of message conveyance is heightened when the learner clears her throat. In line 4, I.K shows her interlocutor 'the difficulty' of having a child when one's pregnant. However being unable to select the appropriate term, the learner substitutes the gap with a phonologically approximate word 'different' and continues on.

As shown in Park (2003), the speaker switches to Korean *mweci* to signal that she has a problem of providing a proper expression not to provide a problematic expression itself in Korean. That is, learners often switch codes not necessarily to provide lexical items themselves as can be expected, but to simply mark that they have problems and that they are in the process of word searches.

### 3.3 The Performance of Graduate Students

#### 3.3.1 Quantitative Analysis of Graduate Students

In addition to the two levels of undergraduate groups, 5 graduate students participated in this experiment to reveal the influence of

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1 The code-switched word, "mweci" refers to "what is it" or "what would you say it" in the speakers' target language. The speaker has uttered the word in a normal tone. The romanization follows the Yale System.



discourse domains and learners' conversational behavior. One student did not complete the conversation on two domains and, therefore, was excluded.

Table 2.  
Quantitative Analysis of Graduate Students

		Graduate (n=4)	
		T1	T2
Length of Responses	mean	285.5	290.75
	number of words		
	mean	57.75	52.25
	number of t-units		
	words per t-unit	4.9437	5.565
Grammatical complexity	NNSs' participation rate	73.65%	62.42%
	number of subordinate clauses	3.5	5.5
	subordinate clauses per t-unit	0.061	0.105
Fluency	mean	43.5	46.75
	number of fillers		
	mean number of false starts	18.75	30.75
	speech rate	1.585	1.7625

Unlike the results of the undergraduate students, the graduate students showed mixed results. Although the graduate students performed greater number of t-units and higher participation rate on T1, they have showed unrespected results with greater number of words, words per t-unit, subordinate clauses, subordinate clauses per t-unit, fillers, false starts and greater speech rate in T2.

### 3.3.2 Qualitative Analysis of Graduate Students

For a more fine-grained observation, the graduate students' data were also analyzed qualitatively by adopting conversation analysis. The

graduate students revealed a general tendency of professionalism on their academic majors. They elaborated more, and gave specific descriptions and explanations on domains, where they had greater content-knowledge.

In example 6, the interviewer asked the NNS which part she favored among her major. Here, occurs another similar pattern as in the previous example.

#### Example 6

- 1 NS : So um .. what's your favorite thing about your major?
- 2 E.J : Umm .... . Classic Literature.
- 3 NS : Mm ...
- 4 E.J : Uh: ... exactly, uh: ... Ea-Early Time in China. Early China literature.
- 5~11 E.J : About um:: four:: do you know Lunwi ah ... - Lunwi xxx confuder-confuer ...  
12 books?
- 13 NS : Oh~

E.J begins her turn with a filler and a long pause in line 2. After taking a moment of time to construct her speech, she produces a brief response by answering '*Classic Literature*'. As the NS reveals restricted feedback, E.J noticed that she needed to support her response with more information. So, in line 4, E.J elaborates (*exactly*) her speech with more content (*Early Time in China*), simultaneously converging the intended message to a more specific field (*Early China literature*).

What was distinguishably notable from the graduate students' data was that these EFL speakers with more relevant content-knowledge operate topic-initiation and confirm authority of expertise on their discourse domains. This phenomenon was contrary to the expectations not only because E.J was a NNS who was incompetent in her second language compared to that of the NS, but also because E.J as an interviewee was presumed to provide only response forms to the interviewers' questions. E.J, as a student majoring in Chinese literature, attempted to provide more information on her academic major by providing a representative example which symbolizes her specific field in a question form in line 12 (*Do you know...?*).

### 3.4 Observation on EFL Learners' Discourse Domains

The basic premise of the discourse domain model is that second language learners have a strong tendency to display L2 performance variation

depending upon domains. The discourse domain model is perceived as an organization of complex dimensions such as practice effects which reveal topic familiarity, personal investment or importance of the domain, and content-knowledge. It is in these discourse domains that learners display active participation, more grammatical and coherent structures, while dominating the interaction even with a NS, and feel confident enough to maintain the conversation.

Studies on the discourse domain have assigned this field primarily to learners' academic majors (Zuengler 1989, Zuengler & Bent 1991, Whyte 1994, 1995). It was presumed that academic major is the optimal conversational field which reflects topic familiarity due to practice effects, degree of importance, and furthermore learners' expertise. Among these three criteria which contribute to the formation of the learners' discourse domains, in this research, the learners' academic majors did not seem convincing to Korean EFL learners. However, post-conversation questionnaires were conducted in order to see if the given 10 topics in the experiment revealed the characteristics of the learners' discourse domains. The post-conversation questionnaire searched for previous experience in terms of practice effects and observed the conversational topics selected as Topic 1 and Topic 2.

#### **4. Conclusion & Pedagogical Implications**

In an English educational environment as in Korea, where more than forty students are packed into a single class language has been primarily instructed, focused on reading, grammar and other written materials. Opportunities on productive L2 use has been even less. A growing research on communicative approach has evolved where Korean EFL learners can develop their L2 oral proficiency. In this respect, this paper attempted to investigate EFL learners' L2 oral productions where active participation can be elicited, where the participants can feel more confident, while talking about their conversation topic regardless of their L2 proficiency level. Though not all the results were statistically significant, they have revealed a manifest tendency of the discourse domain effect with enhanced production on EFL learners, and therefore, demand more attention.

The first research question along with its hypothesis presented in this research project was to examine the impact of discourse domains on the conversational behaviors of EFL learners in NS-NNS interactions. According to the results of the study, the intermediate and the advanced students both showed a general tendency of active participation in time at talk, increased number of word productions, more coherent structures of t-units and subordinate clauses and increased speech rate on their discourse domains. The intermediate students showed significantly greater participation rate and greater subordinate clauses per t-unit on their discourse domains. Due to higher level of proficiency, the advanced students were able to compensate for their lack of content-knowledge, practice effects, or investment and contribute similarly on both domains.

The second research question along with its hypothesis was to observe the impact of the discourse domain upon learners' L2 proficiency levels. Examining the length of response, the intermediate students produced greater words and t-units with longer participation in time of talk on their discourse domains. The grammatical complexity also revealed that the mean of intermediate students' words per t-unit and subordinate clauses per t-unit were greater on their discourse domains than that on their neutral domains. Unexpectedly, two of the measures of fluency, fillers and false starts, were slightly greater on the discourse domains. However, those results were statistically non-significant. Speech rate, the other indicator of fluency, showed acceleration with more word production on the intermediate students' discourse domains. However, more dominant interactional behaviors were exhibited according to L2 proficiency levels implying that the advanced level still produced greater performance overall than the intermediate students.

The final research question along with its hypothesis was presented earlier in an attempt to investigate the conversational features depending on domains. The participants showed a general tendency of using elaboration strategies on their discourse domains, regardless of their L2 proficiency level. Conversational fields, which incorporate learners' sufficient content-knowledge, positive attitudes and experience, have shown that learners give ample descriptions to specify their message through exemplifications or employ highly organized speech productions through metaphors. Majority of the intermediate students had a hard time succeeding in their roles and have shown expressions of uncertainty, hedges and code-switching strategies especially on their

neutral topic domains.

Investigating learners' discourse domains, regarding the learners' interest, relevant content-knowledge, and practice effects can be applied in L2 conversation textbooks. A majority of the EFL conversation textbooks in Korea have tried to cover a wide range of fields in economy, politics, literature and so on. However, a lot of current EFL topics are chiefly neutral topic domains to Korean EFL university students. If this is the case, it may not aid the learners' L2 productions at all. To balance both domains, therefore, it may be most recommendable if the discourse domains are involved in textbooks and the neutral domains are taught in class.

It is suggested that providing an environment where the learners can participate actively, feel more confident and willing to communicate is important. However, it may be hazardous to perceive academic majors as discourse domains to Korean EFL learners. Perhaps academic majors can be given plenty of drills and activities before taken into interaction. Educator's awareness of the importance of the discourse domain effect is required and should provide sufficient information with frequent opportunities of practice effects to aid learners' majors in converging towards the discourse domains. The conversation features shown by the NNSs may also be taught in class as a communicative strategy to maintain the floor and provide more understanding of the NNSs' intentions and their discourse management.

This paper admits that there are several methodological limitations of this observation that need further investigation to clear the relationship between discourse domains and learners' conversational behaviors. A longitudinal study on the learners' discourse domain and its influence on interlanguage variation, and possibly interlanguage development, may also contribute to a better understanding of learners' conversational behaviors.

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## Appendix I

## Pre-conversation Questionnaire

다음 10 . 평소 애  
가장 흥미 있었던 또는 관심이 많았던 주제를 먼저 쓰고 가장 관심이 적었던 주제를 마지막에  
쓰면 됩니다.

[ ]

- ① 결혼과 이혼 (Marriage & Divorce)
- ② 남아선호 (Koreans' Preference for Boys)
- ③ 미신 (Superstitions)
- ④ 대학생들의 부정행위 (College Cheating)
- ⑤ 한국인들의 소비습관 (Korean Spending Habits)
- ⑥ 취업 (Finding a Job)
- ⑦ 몸매 관리 (Keeping Fit)
- ⑧ 흡연과 음주 (Smoking & Drinking)
- ⑨ X (Generation X)
- ⑩ 이성 관계 (Dating)

1. &lt; &gt;

가장 흥미 있는 주제 ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( )  
가장 관심이 적은 주제 ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( ) - ( )

( )

$$^* [ \quad ] , \quad [ \quad ] \text{학생들의}$$

부정행위] : 흥미 있다고 생각하는 경우

\* [            ] | 대해서는 가장  
관심도 없고 가장 흥미 없다고 생각하는 경우

⇨가장 흥미 있는 주제

(10)   ④   ②   ⑤   ⑧   ⑨   ⑦   ③   ①   ⑥

## Appendix III

위에 제시한 주제에 대해 얼마만큼의 정보를 갖고 있는지 스스로 평가를 해주세요. 가장 많이 알고 있다고 생각하면 ⑤에 동그라미를, 전혀 알고 있지 못한 주제에 대해서 번호에 동그라미를 표시 해주세요.

### 2. < knowledge >

#### (1) (Marriage & Divorce)

①매우 많이 알고 있음    ②약간 알고 있음    ③보통 정도    ④거의 알지 못함    ⑤전혀 알지 못함

#### (2) (Koreans' Preference for Boys)

①매우 많이 알고 있음    ②약간 알고 있음    ③보통 정도    ④거의 알지 못함    ⑤전혀 알지 못함

#### (3) (Superstitions)

①매우 많이 알고 있음    ②약간 알고 있음    ③보통 정도    ④거의 알지 못함    ⑤전혀 알지 못함

#### (4) (College Cheating)

①매우 많이 알고 있음    ②약간 알고 있음    ③보통 정도    ④거의 알지 못함    ⑤전혀 알지 못함

#### (5) (Koreans' Spending Habits)

①매우 많이 알고 있음    ②약간 알고 있음    ③보통 정도    ④거의 알지 못함    ⑤전혀 알지 못함

#### (6) (Finding a Job)

①매우 많이 알고 있음    ②약간 알고 있음    ③보통 정도    ④거의 알지 못함    ⑤전혀 알지 못함

#### (7) / (Keeping Fit)

①매우 많이 알고 있음    ②약간 알고 있음    ③보통 정도    ④거의 알지 못함    ⑤전혀 알지 못함

#### (8) (Smoking & Drinking)

①매우 많이 알고 있음    ②약간 알고 있음    ③보통 정도    ④거의 알지 못함    ⑤전혀 알지 못함

#### (9) X (Generation X)

①매우 많이 알고 있음    ②약간 알고 있음    ③보통 정도    ④거의 알지 못함    ⑤전혀 알지 못함

#### (10) (Dating)

①매우 많이 알고 있음    ②약간 알고 있음    ③보통 정도    ④거의 알지 못함    ⑤전혀 알지 못함



### Post-conversation Questionnaire

지금까지 외국인과 간단히 대화를 나눈 주제에 대한 몇 가지 사항에 대해서 성실히 답변해 주시면 감사하겠습니다.

한 질문에 한 번호만 표시 해주시면 감사하겠습니다.

[TOPIC 1] [TOPIC 2] 동일

(1) 이 주제에 관해서 한국인과 이야기를 나눠 본 경험이 있습니까?

① 매우 많이    ② 약간 자주    ③ 보통 정도    ④ 거의 없음    ⑤ 전혀 얘기 한적 없음

(2) 이 주제에 관해서 영어를 쓰는 원어민과 이야기를 나눠 본 경험이 있습니까?

① 매우 많이    ② 약간 자주    ③ 보통 정도    ④ 거의 없음    ⑤ 전혀 얘기 한적 없음

(3) \_\_\_\_\_ ?

① 인터넷    ② TV/ \_\_\_\_\_ / 1문    ③ 평소 대화    ④ 독서    ⑤ 교육/ 1교

필수 사항 2 위 방법 외에 어떻게 또 접할 수 있을까요?

☞ \_\_\_\_\_

(4) 이 주제에 대해서 한국인과 대화를 가졌을 때 얼마만큼의 자신감이 생겼습니까?

① 매우 많이    ② 약간 많이    ③ 보통 정도    ④ 거의 안 생김    ⑤ 전혀 생기지 않음

(5) 이 주제에 대해서 외국인과 대화를 가졌을 때 얼마만큼의 자신감이 생겼습니까?

① 매우 많이    ② 약간 많이    ③ 보통 정도    ④ 거의 안 생김    ⑤ 전혀 생기지 않음

(6) 이 주제가 평소 한국어 대화에서 얼마만큼 자주 등장하였나요?

① 매우 많이    ② 약간 많이    ③ 보통 정도    ④ 거의 안 생김    ⑤ 전혀 생기지 않음

(7) 이 주제에 대해서 외국인과 대화를 가졌을 때 스스로 얼마만큼의 정보를 보여 주셨습니까?

① 매우 많이    ② 약간 많이    ③ 보통 정도    ④ 거의 없음    ⑤ 전혀 없음

(8) \_\_\_\_\_ ?

① 매우 많이    ② 약간 많이    ③ 보통 정도    ④ 거의 없음    ⑤ 전혀 없음

(9) \_\_\_\_\_ ?

① 매우 많이    ② 약간 많이    ③ 보통 정도    ④ 거의 없음    ⑤ 전혀 없음

(10) 영어회화수업에서 이 주제를 다루게 된다면 영어 구사력에 얼마만큼 도움이 될 것이라고 생각 하십니까?

① 매우 많이    ② 약간 많이    ③ 보통 정도    ④ 거의 안 됨    ⑤ 전혀 도움 안 됨